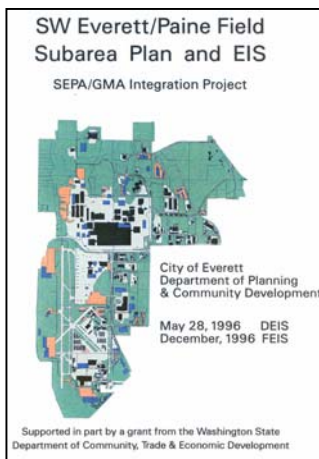




SEPA/GMA

Growth Management Services

Combining environmental review, planning pays dividends



Description

A detailed land use and capital facilities plan – crafted to avoid or mitigate environmental impacts – is a powerful and cost-effective tool for achieving fiscal goals, promoting economic development, improving quality of life, and addressing pressing environmental issues, such as endangered species. Cities and counties are saving time and money, encouraging the kinds of development they want, and protecting the environment by shifting consideration of environmental impacts to earlier stages of the development process.

Background

The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) was enacted in 1971 to ensure that governmental decisions are made with an understanding of their potential impacts on the natural and built environments. In growth management planning, SEPA review is triggered: (1) when a county or city proposes adoption of county-wide planning policies, comprehensive plans, subarea plans, or development regulations; and (2) when local governments process permit applications for projects that meet thresholds defined in SEPA.

Cities and counties can streamline the review of individual projects when their policies, plans and regulations – and the SEPA documents associated with them – already address project impacts.

SEPA review of policies, plans, and regulations can also be streamlined by using the SEPA process to help craft the policies, plans, and regulations instead of reviewing them after they are developed and proposed.

Benefits of combining environmental review and planning include:

- Efficient use of tax money in land use and infrastructure planning, in the permit process, and in providing public facilities and services.
- A more predictable future for the community.
- A reduction in time and cost to developers to obtain permits for many projects.
- Greater certainty about which developments are likely to be permitted in various locations and what conditions may be required to minimize impacts.



- Greater environmental protection resulting from consideration of the cumulative impacts of all development in the area on the built and natural environment.



The Regulatory Reform Act of 1995 addresses in state law the shift in emphasis from project review to primary reliance on plans and development regulations and the SEPA review of those documents. The role of SEPA in project review is to focus on issues and impacts not adequately addressed in the plans and regulations.

What's Being Done

The greatest benefits are produced when detailed environmental review: (1) begins in the earliest stages of policy development, (2) is on the largest feasible geographic scale, and (3) continues at each stage. For example, a watershed management plan that incorporates SEPA considerations into the development of the plan will produce far-reaching efficiencies. Each member of the watershed-planning group will benefit by not having to recreate its own SEPA documentation when they adopt the plan and carry out each action. In addition, they benefit because cumulative and regional impacts of their future actions will be better understood.

Some communities adopted comprehensive plans under the Growth Management Act (GMA) with detailed environmental impact statements (EIS) that project developers can use instead of individual environmental analyses. Other communities have less detailed EISs that will need to be supplemented for later actions.

Options remain for communities that did not combine growth management and SEPA. Subarea, transportation, sewer, water, stormwater, and other plans can produce better results than parcel-by-parcel, project-by-project environmental review. A number of communities have found the subarea – a neighborhood, industrial area, downtown, or highway corridor – provides the most “bang-for-the-buck” in striking a balance between protecting the environment and encouraging development.



Some cities are making permitting easier in selected subareas for the types of development they want to attract by designating these areas as “planned actions” under SEPA. A planned action is a type of project action whose impacts are analyzed in an EIS associated with a GMA plan. Planned actions do not require a SEPA threshold determination and an EIS. Several communities are taking this additional step by combining SEPA and GMA to move toward “community preparedness” for development and “permit-readiness” for sites most suitable for development.

The GMA requirement to periodically review and update comprehensive plans and development regulations may stimulate more communities to take advantage of the benefits of combining planning and environmental review.

For More Information

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Assistance Available

The Washington Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development's growth management staff can provide assistance by telephone, e-mail, site visits, and regional presentations. Staff can recommend methods and techniques for consolidating and streamlining the SEPA process and identify contacts in other communities.

Photos: CTED/Rita R. Robison, Peter Riley